

18 JUN 1971

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Top Aides to Johnson Misled on War, 'Used'

President Lyndon B. Johnson and a handful of intimates were misusing the National Security Council as an approval "cover" for clandestine war operations that were never discussed in Security Council meetings.

Johnson asked top aides to approve retaliatory bombing raids on North Vietnam even while keeping it secret from those aides that the United States was provoking the Communists into the acts against which we were retaliating.

This critical point has not yet been made clear in the New York Times' articles that have made it appallingly obvious that the Johnson administration misled the public and duped the Congress into giving early support to U.S. military intervention in Vietnam.

On Feb. 7, 1965, a Security Council meeting was called after 8 American servicemen were killed and 62 wounded in a Viet Cong raid on Pleiku. The Security Council was asked to approve "retaliatory" raids on North Vietnamese targets despite the added risks flowing out of the fact that Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin was in Hanoi.

The Council did "approve" such raids, which were the beginning of round-the-clock bombings of North Vietnam, although months of U.S.-inspired commando raids, mercenary bombings, sabotage and other assaults against North Vietnam under "Plan 34A" had not been revealed to:

1. Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, a statutory member of the National Security Council.

2. Edward A. McDermott, director of the Office of Emergency Planning and also a statutory member of the council, or to his successor.

3. This reporter, who was then director of the U.S. Information Agency, and who sat on the Security Council at the invitation of the President.

There were others present who were asked by the President to say yea or nay on the bombing raids (the council is advisory only, the President alone making decisions), but who were being asked to endorse grave actions without being given all the facts.

Only intuition, suspicion and a piecing together of vague references in certain "top secret" and "no distribution" telegrams enabled some who sat on the council to know that there was a "plan 34A."

"When I read '34A' I thought they were talking about a hotel room," Humphrey told me. "I swear I'd never heard of it until I read it in the Times. Those papers revealed by the Times were as secret to me as they were to the general public."

Certain highly classified data is made known to government officials only on a "need to know" basis, and very clearly President Johnson or his top advisers decided that the vice president and others in the Security Council meetings did not have a "need to know."

The Times revelations have made it clear to people holding topmost jobs in the Johnson administration that they were being used as a "cover" for clandestine operations planned and ordered by the President and a handful of intimate advisers.

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, CIA Director John McCone, presidential adviser McGeorge Bundy and Gen. Maxwell Taylor, sometime-presidential-adviser and sometime-ambassador-to-Saigon, were the key men calling the signals that Johnson asked the Security Council to endorse.

The Tonkin Gulf episode, five months before the Pleiku raid, was a similar case of misuse of the National Security Council. Some members of

the council knew of the U.S. Desoto patrol, but were left to believe that it was just an innocent surveillance operation that was attacked wantonly by the North Vietnamese.

The full Security Council never was told that the allies had carried out two destructive 34A raids against North Vietnam only hours before North Vietnamese torpedoboats attacked the destroyers Maddox and Turner Joy. Nor was the Congress told this before it voted, 88 to 2 in the Senate and 416 to 0 in the House, for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that broadened the President's war-making powers.

These are facts that the public, the courts, the Justice Department, the White House and everyone else ought to ponder before they get too busy harassing and hounding the New York Times, trying to halt the flow of information that the people should have had years ago.

The Times has revealed

things that certainly are embarrassing to the United States internationally, and damning of some individuals domestically. But Defense Secretary Melvin Laird must face the fact that embarrassment is not the same as "damaging to national security."

This tragic episode tells us that political leaders who try to dupe the public and the Congress get burned—and that the truth comes out anyhow.

It also tells us that a passion for secrecy, which Johnson had, is dangerous in a democracy. When a President limits great decisions on war and peace to a small clique of advisers, callously using others as a cover, he is more likely to lead the country into trouble.

Instead of trying to curb the Times' freedom to continue what has been a monumental public service, the Nixon administration would better devote its time to figuring out how it can avoid the errors that brought tragedy to Lyndon Johnson.